DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 232 CE 083 766

AUTHOR	Muller, Anne, Ed.; Murtagh, Teresa, Ed.
TITLE	Literacy--The 877 Million Left Behind.
INSTITUTION	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, Paris (France).
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	6p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.unesco.org/education/education_today/today02.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)
JOURNAL CIT	Education Today; n2 p4-7 Jul-Sep 2002
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Adult Programs; Community Education; Community Programs; Definitions; Developing Nations; *Educational Needs; *Educational Practices; Financial Support; Foreign Countries; *Functional Literacy; Government Role; Illiteracy; Informal Education; *Literacy Education; Local Issues; Material Development; Needs Assessment; Nonformal Education; Program Effectiveness; Public Policy; Trend Analysis; Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS	Africa; Africa (East); Asia (South); Asia Pacific Programme of Education for All; Mexico; Nigeria; Pakistan; Rwanda; UNESCO; United Nations

ABSTRACT

In 2000, approximately 877 million adults worldwide were illiterate and 113 million children did not attend school. More than two-thirds of those individuals lived in East and South Asia, and two-thirds were females. Functional illiteracy remains high in developed and developing nations alike. The reasons include weak training in how to teach reading and insufficient emphasis on reading in school curricula. Action Aid's innovative grassroots project REFLECT has achieved success by using reading materials developed by local communities. The community learning centers that are run by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Asia-Pacific Programme of Education for All in 18 countries, provided outside the formal education system and managed by local people constitute another successful initiative. Despite their success, nonformal education programs, including adult literacy programs, rarely receive more than 5% of national education budgets. Various theories have been proposed to explain governments' reluctance to fund such programs. Research confirms the effectiveness of literacy campaigns, particularly sustained campaigns that took place in "mobilizing" societies and were conducted by socialist movements. Governments must realize that creating a literate society is a process requiring generations and that the keys to literacy campaigns' success include sustained support, adequate provision of materials, and relevance to local community needs. (MN)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 468 232

Literacy--The 877 Million Left Behind

Education Today n2 p4-7 Jul-Sep 2002

Editors
Anne Muller and Teresa Murtagh

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
Paris, France

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

[] This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

[] Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

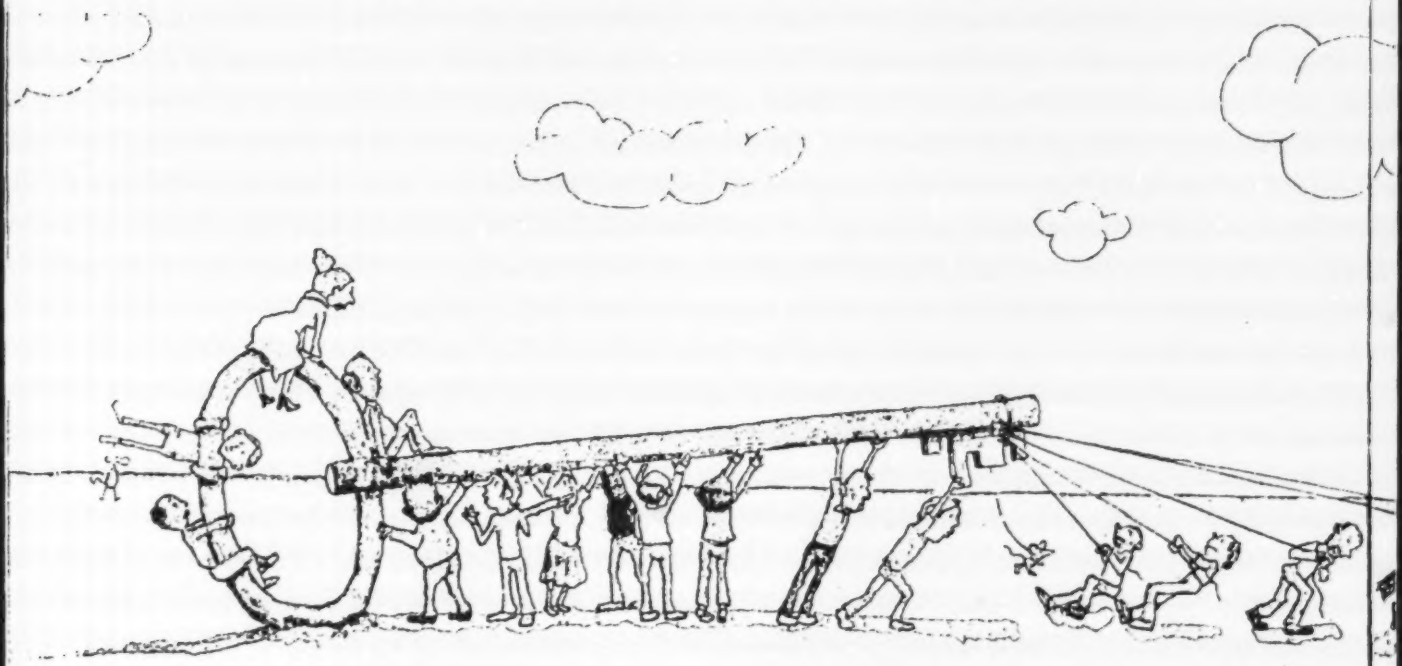
[] Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CE 083 766

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Literacy – the 877 million

If efforts to transform the lives of hundreds of millions of people by teaching them to read and to be answered. Why are governments not more active? What works? How are the results to be



Erik Staal

"My life is tilling the soil. I don't need to read. The Bible? They tell us about that at Mass. The news? I listen to the radio. The newspaper costs the price of a kilo of salt for my kids," says Godfroid Bimenyimana, a 57-year-old Rwandan farmer.

Godfroid and millions like him have no desire to read and write because they do not see the direct benefits. They think it will not change their lives.

So why force literacy on people? For Professor H. S. Bhola, a literacy expert, "reading and writing are the second culmination of our humanity", after speech. By failing to provide literacy, we deprive people of being fully human, he says.

For Claudia Harvey of UNESCO, "it's a moral issue. Can we justify excluding 877 million from participating in the modern world just because they are rural and difficult to reach?"

Literacy is important, says Adama Ouane of the UNESCO Institute for Education, "because it's the key to the toolbox that contains empowerment, a better livelihood, smaller and healthier families, and participation in democratic life."

A measure of its importance, he says, is the fact that two of the six goals of the Dakar Framework for Action – the international pledge made in 2000 to provide education for all by 2015 – mention adult literacy. But since literacy is the "key of keys", it permeates all six goals.

The gains for women in particular are immense. For example, a study in Bangladesh showed that women with secondary education were three times more likely to attend a political meeting than women with no education.

What is literacy? Literacy is more than the ability to read, write and do arithmetic. It comprises other skills needed for an individual's full autonomy and capacity to function effectively in a given society. It can range from reading instructions for fertilizers, or medical prescriptions, knowing which bus to catch, keeping accounts for a small business or operating a computer.

The scope of the problem

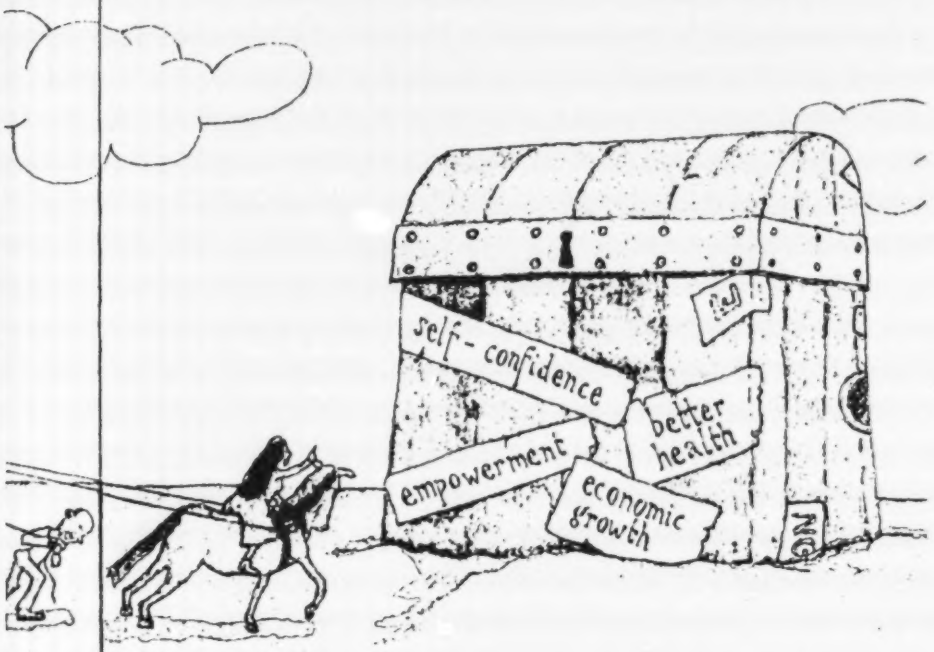
In 2000 there were some 877 million illiterate adults, with 113 million children not attending school. More than two-thirds (68 per cent) of these illiterates can be found in East and South Asia. Worst hit are females,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ɔn left behind

ad and
s to be

write are to succeed, some questions have measured? And why is literacy so important anyway?



who account for up to two-thirds of all illiterate adults. In some regions, ethnic or linguistic minorities lose out, in others those who live in remote areas; often they overlap. Illiteracy rates in the Arab region and sub-Saharan Africa are respectively 38 per cent and 37 per cent. In Latin America and the Caribbean they are 12 per cent.

In developed nations functional illiteracy is also widespread. An OECD adult literacy study of twenty industrialized countries found that at least one in four adults fell below the level needed for coping with demands of daily life and work in a complex society.

Why are reading skills so poor? For Winsome Gordon, Chief of the UNESCO Section for Primary Education, training in how to teach reading is weak and the school curriculum does not put enough emphasis on it. "Schools need to spend more time on reading so that children are permanently literate by the end of the primary cycle," she says.

Motivation to learn is essential, and for many, religion provides it – to read the Bible or the Koran. For others it is the desire to write a personal letter, to earn money, to make something of their lives because they missed out on school or to help with their children's education. Or a will to be more autonomous and not to have to depend on others.

Meeting local needs

The will to learn to read is greatest when courses are in the learners' own language and relevant to their lives. Action Aid's innovative grassroots project REFLECT uses materials developed by local communities: maps, diagrams, calendars and stories, songs and drama.

INTERVIEW

Community learning in Mexico

Mexico is introducing a new concept for adult learning. Interview with Ramón de la Peña Manrique, Chairman of the Presidential Commission on Adult Learning

What is the scale of Mexico's illiteracy problem?
In Mexico, half of the population is left behind. Out of a population of 65 million adults, 5.9 million are illiterate, 11.7 million did not finish grammar school and 14.9 million have not completed junior high school. Every year 800,000 more Mexicans join their ranks.

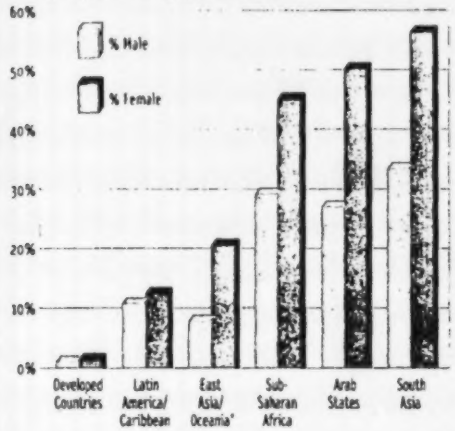
You are president of CONEVYT, the National Council of Education for Life-Long Learning. What is it?
CONEVYT is an inter-secretarial commission including education, health, social development, agriculture and communications, with a budget of about $100 million. We are responsible for creating a national educational system for those 32.5 million Mexicans left behind, offering them an education relevant for their lives and work. We are doing this through modern "community plazas". These plazas offer, satellite education programmes, videos, CDs and books; as well as educational portals on the Internet. We already have 320 plazas. This year we will have 2,000 more, and by the end of 2006 we will have 20,000.

What is the response of users?
Very good; in some cases they have developed their own internet sites. They see the computers and the portal as something magic – they say, "for the first time the first world has come to us." Between 50 and 200 attend sessions, and when we have 20,000 community plazas we will be catering for 3 million people a month.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Literacy – the 877 million left behind

Estimated world illiteracy rates, by region and by gender, 2000



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics
*Not including Japan, Australia and New Zealand

Community learning centres, run by UNESCO's Asia-Pacific Programme of Education for All (APPEAL) in eighteen countries from Central Asia to Papua New Guinea is another successful initiative. The centres are outside the formal education system and managed by local people. Their services are tailored to local needs, from basic literacy to education for developing skills and generating income. Unlike school, there is no standard curriculum and no fixed age group.

Small-scale efforts can often show the way forward, says UNESCO consultant Clinton Robinson. In an area where the school system hardly functions in the Democratic Republic of Congo, volunteers teach in the local language, Ngbaka, through which they introduce Lingala, the national language, and French. "It has continued despite the war because it's run by local people, adapted to their needs, at low cost," says Robinson.

If literacy can improve people's lives, why do governments not invest more in it? Non-formal education, which includes adult literacy programmes, rarely receives more than 5 per cent of national education budgets.

Reluctant governments

A variety of theories are put forward to explain governments' reluctance. Some apparently prefer to forget about adults and concentrate on formal schooling for children to ensure literate future generations. But experts agree that this approach is too short-sighted. "Why oppose adult literacy to school and children's education when their interdependence is evident?" questions Ouane. "Literacy and empowerment of parents and communities matter just as much as for children's schooling," he says. "If parents are illiterate, it's an effort for children to have meaningful experiences at school."

Another theory is that some countries are reluctant to educate and therefore empower the masses because of the obvious link between literacy and democracy. "Governments fear that once you make people literate, they won't be able to misinform them," says Michael Omolewa, Nigeria's Ambassador to UNESCO.

But even when governments want to address the issue, they are handicapped by the information gaps: the number of illiterates, who they are and who is doing what to reach them. "On top of that, the methodologies to collect data are lacking and the capacity to assess and monitor literacy is inadequate," says Margarete Sachs-Israel of UNESCO's Literacy and Non-Formal Education Section. This means, she says, that "the impact of literacy programmes in simply not known". A study of literacy assessment practices in India, China, Nigeria and Mexico called for practical and cost-effective methodologies for literacy assessment at country and programme levels. More broadly, UNESCO is currently developing Non-formal Education Management Information Systems to collect, process and analyse non-formal sector data.

INTERVIEW

The fight for non-formal education in Pakistan

Punjab has high illiteracy rates, especially among women. Interview with Shaheen Rahman, Minister of Social Welfare, Women's Development, Literacy and Women's Empowerment in this Pakistani province.

What is the current situation in Punjab?
In the province about a third of women are literate, and 30 per cent of children are out-of-school. The situation is worst in the southern part, where about 80 per cent of all adults are illiterate. The main literacy programmes involve nearly 10,000 learning centres teaching about 360,000 people, 95 per cent of whom are young women and girls. NGOs and civil society are partners at all steps. About three-quarters of children enter some system of learning.

What are the successes?
There are no drop-outs in the learning centres. Partners are interested in ensuring that girls continue to learn. Interest is being generated, as most learners live in villages and want to study further. People in other areas are exerting pressure because they want such centres too.

Why is it difficult for some countries to tackle illiteracy?
The problems they face are: lack of economic resources; parental feelings that education doesn't pay off fast enough; the belief that girls' education is not important; lack of reading materials; and poverty. Moreover, non-formal education is facing intense problems as the formal system does not accept it as an equal partner. I have to fight like mad to get resources for non-formal education.

What progress do you think will have been made in Punjab by 2015?
Female literacy will have increased from the current 30 percent to at least 50 per cent. We will also improve the atmosphere for learning, especially among teenage girls. Political commitment and recognition of literacy as essential for poverty alleviation will do the trick!

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Why a United Nations Literacy Decade?

There are 990 million reasons for the 2003-2012 United Nations Literacy Decade: the 877 million illiterate adults in the world, and 113 million children not attending school.

Proclaiming the Decade, the UN General Assembly stated that creating literate environments was essential to eradicating poverty, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development. It also chose UNESCO to lead the Decade.

Its objectives include: reducing the absolute numbers of illiterate people, especially women and those living in places where literacy rates are high – notably Africa and South Asia; creating dynamic literate environments and making a demonstrable improvement in the quality of life of those who take part in literacy programmes.

The Decade is about giving a voice to the voiceless. Illiterate people are excluded, they have no lobbies or groups to fight their cause.

→ Many countries have made genuine efforts to provide literacy to their populations: among them are Botswana, Colombia, India, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia and the United Republic of Tanzania. But a certain degree of controversy prevails as to the effectiveness of some of these campaigns.

Do literacy campaigns work?

"Literacy campaigns work every time and continue to work if we stick with them. Nothing is sustainable if it isn't sustained," says Bhola. The campaigns that succeeded, he adds, were typically those that took place in "mobilizing" societies and conducted by socialist movements. They involved the people and mobilized extensively. This large-scale mobilization explains their success.

The challenge to literacy campaigns of the past has been the absence of reading materials. The printed word in some Indian communities can boil down to one, written on a temple wall (Shiva). Some villages have no road signs, health services, clinics, or banks. "You can't talk of literacy and not create a literate environment, it's nonsense," says Bhola. "If governments provided appropriate services, communities would automatically become literate and a print culture would follow."

Creating a literate society is a matter of generations, says literacy expert Professor C. J. Daswani. "Taking a totally illiterate family to total literacy is a matter of planning for three generations," he says.

To shift from the absence of print to a dynamic literate environment requires a quantum leap. This is, nevertheless, one of the aims of the UN Literacy Decade which starts in 2003 (see box).

Some new literates have found solutions to the lack of things to read: they create their own materials by writing about their lives, local events and the history of their people, and share their texts around.

Mobile libraries satisfy the demands of other groups and, more recently, the multi-purpose community centres in Africa and Asia, equipped with newspapers and Internet, are increasingly responding to the needs of medical students, farmers and housewives.

What would Godfroid from Rwanda think of these new developments? Some years on perhaps he too – much like his fellow farmers in Uganda's community centres – will be getting the market price of his farm products from the Internet. ●

INTERVIEW

Literacy challenges in Nigeria

Adult education in Nigeria dates back to the eleventh century. But how is this nation of nearly 150 million people meeting literacy challenges today? Interview with Michael Omolewa, literacy expert and Nigerian Ambassador to UNESCO.

What measures is Nigeria taking to uphold its adult education tradition?
Our tradition remains strong, with emphasis on acquisition of knowledge as an instrument of empowerment. But rural people and women have often been left behind. In 1971 we set up the National Council for Adult Education to ensure that programmes meet learners' needs because if they don't, they regard education as a waste of time and won't participate.

What were the results of the ten-year literacy campaign started in 1982?
We recorded many achievements: we created the structure – the National Commission for Mass Literacy, with support from organizations such as UNDP and UNESCO. NGOs have demonstrated that they can make an independent contribution. One big programme, started with help from the British Council, created drop-in literacy centres for market women.

What would be major achievements for the United Nations Literacy Decade?
For people to know the value of literacy and its indispensability in global society. The hope is to push forward the EFA goals, and the Decade will supplement EFA efforts by targeting specific groups denied access. In remote areas, stakeholders – governments, NGOs, teachers – who have not been able to perform effectively will be challenged. ●

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

☐ This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

☑ This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").